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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: A/S BOUCHER PUSHES AWAMI LEAGUE TO PARTICIPATE IN  
FREE, FAIR, NON-VIOLENT ELECTION

Classified By: A/DCM D.C. McCullough, reason para 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) Summary: During A/S Boucher's election-focused meeting with Sheikh Hasina, the Awami League president acknowledged that her party's legitimacy hinges on participating in the electoral process. She would not, however, rule out an opposition boycott. Boucher pushed for Awami League participation and the need for a free, fair, and peaceful election. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On August 3, SCA A/S Richard Boucher met with Awami League (AL) president Sheikh Hasina for 45 minutes at her residence. Hasina's son Sajib Wajed Joy, several senior AL leaders, Ambassador, and econoff (note taker) were also present.

¶3. (SBU) Hasina opened by contrasting the government of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) with her own from 1996 to ¶2001. Her government opened up the economy to the private sector, including broadcasting, which the BNP has exploited to enrich itself. She has barred five TV cable channels from covering her events because they are owned by biased BNP cronies who got their licenses illicitly. Meanwhile, she lamented, ETV, an "impartial" channel licensed by her government, has been illegally shut down. (Note: ETV was widely viewed as pro-Awami League.)

¶4. (SBU) Hasina refused to rule out an election boycott, but stressed her democratic convictions. "Our party always wants elections, always wants to participate... we want to prove that the ballot is more powerful than the bullet." However, she reiterated as essential to free elections her demand for changes in the electoral system and the Caretaker Government set-up. Once Bangladeshis can participate in honest elections, Hasina suggested, she would retire from politics altogether.

¶5. (SBU) A/S Boucher underscored that the United States seeks an election that is free, fair, and non-violent, and that the U.S. neither supports nor opposes any party. Hasina complained that the controversial voter list being prepared by the Election Commission is unacceptable because it excludes minorities and Awami League members. "During my time," Hasina stated, "we tried to make the Election Commission independent," but today it is subservient to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The Awami League favors the EU idea of transparent ballot boxes, but the Election Commission refuses to use them. The Election Commissioners must resign, she said.

¶6. (SBU) Hasina alleged that Jamaat Islami is a terrorist organization, and that its political partner Bangladesh Nationalist Party is complicit in terrorism by association

and its own actions. Although senior leaders of Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB) have been arrested, Hasina wondered about all the persons who coordinated the 500 bomb blasts on August 17, 2005. This group, she stated, is "preserving its strength to use it against our secular democratic government."

¶7. (SBU) Hasina blamed the Prime Minister's party for the absence of inter-party talks. The party, she said, sabotaged talks by nominating a JI leader to participate in the talks, which was unacceptable to the AL because of Jamaat Islami's anti-Liberation history. Ambassador Butenis noted that additional efforts had been made to get the secretaries general of both parties together, but Hasina discounted the sincerity of the ruling coalition.

¶8. (C) Comment: Hasina's boycott threats have diminished in recent weeks, but there's no doubt boycott is at least a plan B for Hasina if the election starts to slip away. Hasina's voluntary retirement from politics is almost inconceivable, especially if arch nemesis Begum Khaleda Zia, or her son, is still standing.

GEORGE